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Democracy in Afghanistan is Wishful Thinking, with W. Chris Mason*Christian

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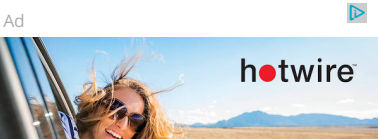
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MONTEREY, CALIF.; AND WASHINGTON — As the world watches today's presidential election in [Afghanistan](#), Americans would do well to ponder the lessons of [Vietnam](#).

The similarities are striking. The Republic of South Vietnam also held elections during the US intervention there, despite an ongoing counterinsurgency. Before American troops got involved, both countries had won upset victories over European powers after a decade of fighting, only to slide into another decade of largely north-south civil war.

As historian [Eric Bergerud](#) has noted, the [United States](#) lost in Vietnam ultimately not because of its deeply flawed approach to counterinsurgency, as damaging as that was, but because South Vietnam never established a government seen as legitimate by a majority of its people. Experts agree that a government that 85 to 90 percent of the population perceives as legitimate is the sine qua non of counterinsurgency success. South Vietnam never came close to achieving such legitimacy, and neither, unfortunately, has post-2001 Afghanistan. In terms of incompetence and endemic corruption, [Kabul](#) is [Saigon](#) déjà vu.

That's why we shouldn't read too much into today's election. Even if it were to yield a high voter turnout, have relatively few irregularities, and produce a strong majority for the winner, it won't give the new government legitimacy.



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The father of modern sociology, [Max Weber](#), pointed out that governments draw their legitimacy from three basic sources: traditional, religious, and legal. The first two are self-explanatory; by "legal," Weber meant Western-style democracies based on popular representation and the rule of law. And in this sense, political failure in Afghanistan was baked into the cake in the 2001 [Bonn](#) Process.



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In its rush to stand up an overnight democratic success story, the Bush administration overlooked Afghan history. Indeed, it was willfully ahistorical. That's tragic, because Afghan history demonstrates conclusively and beyond dispute that legitimacy of governance there is derived exclusively from Weber's first two sources: traditional (in the form of the monarchy and tribal patriarchies) and religious. Either there has been a king, or religious leadership, or a leader validated by the caliphate (or afterwards by indigenous religious polities).

Often in Afghan history, legitimacy thus derived has been reinforced by other means, usually coercive and often brutal. For example, the rule of [Amir Abdur Rahman](#), "The Iron Amir," (1880-1901) and that of the [Taliban](#) (1996-2001) were predicated on accepted sources of legitimacy of governance (dynastic and religious, respectively), but reinforced by totalitarian methods. These two examples make the point that legitimacy should not be conflated with popularity: having the authority to rule is quite distinct from being a popular ruler. American presidents, for example, are always legitimate leaders but not always popular ones.

This historical reality poses a major problem for the US. Democracy is not a coat of paint. A feudal society in which women are still largely treated as property and literacy hovers below 10 percent in rural areas does not magically shortcut 400 years of political development and morph into a democracy in a decade. The current government of Afghanistan's claim to legitimacy is based entirely on a legal source – winning an election. Yet this has no historical basis for legitimizing Afghan rule. The winner of today's election will largely be seen as illegitimate *because* he is elected.

The tragic mistake, which we warned against, was in eliminating the Afghan monarchy from a ceremonial role in the new Afghan Constitution. Nearly two thirds of the delegates to the loya jirga in 2002 signed a petition to make the aging [King Zahir Shah](#) the interim head of state, and only massive

US interference behind the scenes in the form of bribes, secret deals, and arm twisting got the US-backed candidate for the job, [Hamid Karzai](#), installed instead.

The same US and [UN](#) policymakers then rode shotgun over a constitutional process that eliminated the monarchy entirely. This was the Afghan equivalent of the 1964 [Diem Coup](#) in Vietnam: afterward, there was no possibility of creating a stable secular government. While an Afghan king could have conferred legitimacy on an elected leader in Afghanistan, without one, an elected president is on a one-legged stool.

An American cannot declare himself king and be seen as legitimate: monarchy is not a source of legitimacy of governance in America. Similarly, a man cannot be voted president in Afghanistan and be perceived as legitimate. Systems of government normally grow from existing traditions, as they did in the US after the Revolutionary War, for example. In Afghanistan, they were imposed externally. Representative democracy is simply not a source of legitimacy in Afghanistan at this point in its development. This explains in no small measure why a religious source of legitimacy in the form of the hated Taliban is making such a powerful comeback.

As was the case in Vietnam after the Diem Coup, there is little likelihood today of establishing a strong central government in Kabul which is genuinely seen as legitimate in the eyes of the Afghan people and which has significant public support across the country's ethno-sectarian divides. As a revision of the Afghan Constitution to restore a ceremonial monarchy is now highly unlikely, the only remaining option is to move away from counterproductive efforts to "extend the reach of the central government," which further undermine traditional sources of local legitimacy and resistance to the Taliban, and work instead to re-empower legitimate local authorities in a more decentralized state.

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